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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000352

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SUBJECT: LOOKING TO THE ENDGAME ON ID CARDS

Classified By: Ambassador John L. Withers, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: With nineteen days left until the elections, the ID card process has entered the home stretch. The Interior Ministry has set June 15 as the last day to apply for an ID card - after that date ID card centers will be open for distribution of cards only. With nearly 1.3 million IDs applied for, attention now shifts to distribution, and the concern that ID card offices will be unable to meet a last-minute rush to pick up ID cards from the application/distribution centers. As of June 8, although 1,291,361 people have applied for cards, only 826,119 cards are in the hands of voters, meaning a backlog of 465,000 cards yet to be distributed in the remaining days before the elections. At a briefing for the diplomatic corps on June 5, ODIHR analysts downplayed speculation as to the number of passport-less voters who still need ID cards. According to ODIHR, there has never been a reliable figure for just how many voters in Albania lack passports, making it nearly impossible to determine how many passport-less voters remain in need of an ID card. Although the SP continues to claim that the ID card process is being manipulated against the SP, ODIHR has seen no credible evidence to back this claim. Nevertheless, the SP belief that it is being disadvantaged could lead some in the party (including Chairman Rama) to resort to radical options. END SUMMARY.

First, the Numbers

12. (SBU) According to ID card producer Aleat, as of June 8:

- 1,291,361 voters have applied for ID cards
- 1,168,354 cards have been produced
- 826,119 cards have been picked up by voters

Looking at the trend over the past two weeks shows a slow decline in the number of applicants each day, along with a sharp increase in the number of cards picked up each day, with June 8 setting a new record of 27,396 cards distributed to voters. Nevertheless, the difference between the number of cards applied for and those in the hands of voters is dauntingly large - 465,000 as of June 8. However, this backlog of ID cards applied for but not yet delivered to voters is also declining, having peaked on May 24 at just over 530,000.

Focus Now Moves to Distribution

13. (SBU) The real question now is whether card producer Aleat can distribute cards to all voters who need them prior

to the elections. Despite the declining backlog of cards yet to be distributed, Aleat will need to distribute nearly 24,000 cards per day, every day, until the election to eliminate the current 465,000 backlog. Although Aleat has the capacity to distribute that many cards, it can only do so if voters turn up in large numbers to collect their cards. However, it is unknown as to how many of the cards waiting to be picked up belong to voters without passports. The MOI decision to cutoff applications on June 15 and convert all application workstations to distribution stations will do much to boost distribution capacity - but only if voters come in to pick up their IDs.

SP Crying Foul

¶4. (SBU) The SP continues to insist that the ID card process is rigged against it - with one SP representative asserting to PolOff that "of all of the voters yet to receive IDs, two-thirds are SP supporters." Yet the SP has been unable so far to produce credible evidence of any widespread GOA or DP plan or effort to deny ID cards to SP supporters. Embassy and ODIHR observers have seen no evidence of any widespread manipulation, although isolated cases have been seen. ODIHR has documented two cases of DP interference in the ID card process at the local level - both cases involving DP activists "facilitating" the ID application process for DP supporters in ways that break or severely bend the law.

¶5. (C) Certainly the DP has made a strong effort to get IDs into the hands of its supporters. As the ID card process was

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getting off the ground in January of 2009, the GOA forced state employees to apply for ID cards by deducting the 1200 lek fee for the cards from civil servants' paychecks. One human resources manager from a pro-DP company told Post in January that the company paid for IDs for each of its employees. In recent weeks, Post and ODIHR have received multiple reports that the DP, and to a lesser extent the SP, are buying IDs for supporters and transporting supporters to ID application centers.

Passport-less Voters - Chasing a Ghost?

¶6. (C) At a July 5 briefing for the diplomatic corps, ODIHR political analysts downplayed speculation over the number of passport-less voters still without IDs, claiming that the real number will likely never be known. ODIHR said it has no faith in either GOA, SP or other estimates as to the number of passport-less voters in the country. GOA estimates range from 500,000-729,000, while the SP has consistently claimed that there are as many as one million Albanians without passports. Previous Interior Ministry estimates were that approximately half of all ID card applicants were non-passport holders.

¶7. (C) It is important to focus less on how many passport-less voters still lack IDs and to look more at why they still lack them and what, if anything is preventing voters from applying. It is certain that there will be potentially large numbers of voters on election day who lack both a passport and ID card, and the SP will certainly point to these people as "disenfranchised SP voters." Despite some administrative and technical glitches, ODIHR has not uncovered as of yet any credible evidence of GOA, DP or other efforts to deny ID cards to SP supporters. Even so, the SP's conviction that the ID card process is tilted against it has led some in the party - notably SP Chairman Edi Rama - to threaten radical countermeasures, including an electoral boycott. (NOTE: Embassy has advised Rama and other SP leaders that such actions would be self-defeating and be viewed unsympathetically by the USG and EU governments. END NOTE).

GOA Efforts Too Little, Too Late, or Just in Time?

¶ 8. (C) COMMENT: The endgame on IDs will be a race to the wire. Certainly the GOA started the ID process far too late, ensuring that the process would become an at-times chaotic scramble that is more cumbersome and confusing than necessary. The GOA's initial goal of providing 3.1 million IDs by election day was quickly scaled back to the much more modest goal of providing cards to all passport-less voters. Nevertheless, the process seems to be on track to be able to provide ID cards for all who want them - provided the GOA and Aleat can pull out all the stops in an effort to distribute cards over the next nineteen days.

WITHERS